17

"THE ANGEL OF HELL'S HALF ACRE"
by Catherine M. Hood

Come on, boys lets give this little girl enough money,to take her where her husband is working. Lula was sitting up in front of the train coach twisting her handkerchief, that was wet with tears. She wanted to be with her husband Jim, when the baby was born, it was due in one month. When she had a letter from him he was working on the railroad in a small town,near where Corbin, KY. is now. She had only enough money to get there, but as the railroad was built, they moved the men further on, He was about 30 miles from there now as the men on the train informed her. She was only 17 years old and had never traveled before. Everyone on the train put money in the Conductors hat until she had enough to ride 30 miles to Williamsburg. When they arrived there, they found the small shacks empty. The Railroad Company built small shacks along the side of the tracks called section houses

She got off the train at the depot and the man at the station told her they were about 15 miles further on, He sent a wire message to the foreman and he and Jim got a handcar and came after her. They moved and started housekeeping in a small section house by the side of the track and as the men laid more track, they moved on again.

Next move was 15 miles past Williamsburg, and as they had not built another section house, they rented a mountain church house. They would live there all week. Lula would cook for all the section hands.

On May,15,1884 Mary Alice was born with the aid of a midwife. They lived here for several months, on Sunday they would move the bed in a back closet and set up the church seats for church service. They lived near the Cumberland Mountains and the Cumberland River. Once they went in a canoe up the river and gathered Muscadine grapes from the vines on the river cliffs. A Muscadine is a white Grape like we get from California.

Lula would bake fresh yeast bread for her and Jim and the railroad men that boarded there. Once the outlaws came out of the mountains and forced their way into their Church House and eat up all her bread. They were cold and starving but they had money. They paid for the bread and spent the night and left the next morning.

The Wild Turkey roosted in trees on the side of the mountain. Sometimes they would kill one and have Turkey dinner. Once all the men went hunting,they rode horses. One old black man rode a mule and he couldn't keep up with the men on horses. After they killed a deer and divided the meat, they started home. A Panther followed them, it would put its nose on the ground and give a scream. It would sound like it was far off. One old man told the men he is real close, he does that to fool us. The old black man and his mule was behind as usual, all at once the Panther gave a leap from a tree and falls on the mule's hips, his claws slide off and cut the poor mule's hips to the bone. He passed all the other men on horses and got home first. This all happened about 1884 or 1885.

Lula told Jim she was pregnant again and they decided to come home, to Nelson, County at Samuels, Kentucky. They stayed a few months at her mother's home, but as she had three sisters and two brothers at home, they had to find a place of their own. Soon their first son was born on Jan.10,1885. He was a big healthy boy. They named him David Russell and they had David Russell and Mary Alice Baptized at the old St. Gregory Church where the old cemetery is now.

Jim got a job driving a logging team of horses. Since the roads were muddy with deep deep ruts where the wagons wheels ran he had to have 6 horses or 6 mules to pull the wagons. It was a hard job and he worked very hard, and was a good husband and father. In 1886 they had another boy, his name was William. He was also a big and healthy. His dad nicknamed him Pete. He was very close to his mother but he was a tease. He liked to tease everyone. His birthday was Aug.18,1886. After that Mary Elizabeth was born, she was called Bess. She had light brown curly hair and beautiful blue eyes. Her birthday was Oct.1888 and she died at age 19.

The daredevil of the boys was born Dec.1,1889 his name was Joseph. He had very curly light brown hair. He was slim, very active and very bright for his age as he grew up. He and most of his brothers and sisters never was to have a chance to go to school. The first three children went to school a few years, but by then, there were so many more children and so much work and so few clothes, it was impossible for them to go to school. In those years there was no law to make parents send children to school and they lived a long way from school.

March 31,1890 John Edward was born, he had dark brown curly hair and big blue eyes. He was very quiet, very kind, and very religious. His mother taught all the children about God, and taught them their prayers as soon as they could talk. She could not read or write. She never had a chance to go to school for in those days most poor people did not go to school. Her father died when she was 12 old, at Samuels, and left his family with no insurance or income. Lula's mother had to take in washing and do house work for wealthier neighbors to raise her children.

When Lula was a child she went to the old St. Gregory church regularly. A priest she called Father Russell taught her all her Catechism by memory and she never forgot any of it. She always had her children Baptized early after birth. Her husband Jim could read and write for he was an orphan raised at St.Thomas Orphan Home. He was taught to read and write and all about religion. He was an altar boy at St. Thomas Orphanage until he was 12 or 13 years old. He was farmed out to a family named Clark in Davis, County. He stayed until he was about 15 years old. He was 3 years old when his mother and father died. He never was sure when his birthday was or how old he was. He only guessed at it. His parents died about the year of 1861. His mother was sick for a long time and the father was killed in an accident. She died when she got the word of his death. He was a carpenter and was helping build the Tenth Street Depot at Tenth and Broadway in Louisville, Kentucky. when he fell and died from the fall. THey lived at Brooks,Kentucky. in Bullitt County. The Priest from near there sold their home and buried the parents. He took nine of the youngest boys to St. Thomas Orphanage except one boy named John. He was a deaf mute. The Priest put him in a school for deaf mutes. There were two older

brothers one named Michael and one named Patrick. They went to the Civil War of 1861. Jim said, he remembered the family going to the Brooks, Kentucky train depot to see the train load of Soldiers pass. He never knew if these two were killed in the war or not.

Jim said, the woman that kept him in Davis,Co. was so mean to him that he ran away from them. He had a friend about his age and he took his mother's money to pay for his and Jim's ticket. They went to Bardstown, Kentucky and the police caught them. They went before a Judge.
The Judge heard their story and they both told that Jim was beaten. The Judge told them to remove their shirts. Jim had bruises but the other boy didn't. The Judge gave the other boy to his parents . Jim got a job and he was free. When he was about 18 years old he married Lula Coomes. That was the beginning of their large family of 15 children.

The next son was Albert I born May 22,1891. He was a big boy weighing twelve pounds at birth. He was very sickly and skinny as he grew.
The next year James Thomas was born Sept. 16,1892. He was also 12 pounds baby at birth. The Lord must have took pity on Lula for having to suffer so much for she had him without labor. He was also a healthy boy but he was slow to learn and more slow after he lost his left eye in an accident when he was 14 years old. He was always good to his mother and sisters. About this time the father started drinking too much whiskey on Saturday nights. He would stay out late with the men he worked with, and spent too much money on drinks. Lula finally had to ask the Sisters of Charity at Nazareth for food to keep the little ones from going hungry. Some Saturday nights she would take Bud and Pete to go look for him to bring him home.

Jim and Lula bought some land, a few acres in the woods. Some of the land cost less than 100 dollars an acre. They bought some more land and had 86 acres total. They called it,"Hells Half Acre". Some of the land at one time belong to Lula's father. There was a grave of a Negro slave woman on the property. Lula's Grand father owned slaves. When Joe was about twelve years old, he planned to dig in the grave to see if she really was buried with a wide gold wedding band on her finger his mother had told about it. That day was a pretty cool spring day, so he told Pete,"lets find the ring". They found a shovel and hoe and went over to grave hill. They started to dig, one would dig with the hoe and the other one would shovel the dirt out of the grave. Joe finally hit something with the hoe. The hoe gave a big clank! He reached down and pulled a long dark reddish color bone, it look like a leg bone. They were so busy with their digging, they didn't notice a dark cloud had come over them. About the same time he pulled the bone out, there was a big crash of lightning and thunder. The rain came down like a cloud burst. They threw the bone back in the hole and covered it with dirt. They were home in five minutes, all muddy, scared white,and shaking. The old slave lady still has her ring and they didn't go near grave hill for a long time.

A week or so later Lula went to Nazareth again to get the food that was left over after the nuns and college girls ate. There was a lot of food left and perhaps the good sisters added a lot that was not,"left over". They would get two big split baskets full, all they could carry. Late in the day when they were on their way home a big rain and

wind storm came up. Lula told Pete "let's hurry" before the rain causes the creek to raise. They lived on Wilson Creek where it divides into two streams with an island in the middle. When they reached the creek the rain was really pouring. They were trying to keep the food dry with papers. They made it over the first stream to the island, when they saw a wave of water about four feet high coming to them. The wave was coming so fast they could not make it across the island and other stream. They waited for the rain to stop. Lula said to Pete,"don't be afraid" when the rain stops the water will go down fast and we can go on home. The rain did not stop, and they waited and waited but the water got higher and higher. The water got so high there was only one small spot of ground left. They stood close together but still it rained. Lula said,"Pete come kneel down by me and pray". They held hands and prayed for the Lord to help them. All at once they saw big stars come out right over their heads. The stars were so big and bright and so close it seemed like they could reach up and touch them. First it quit raining on them but it was still raining out over the water. Soon it stopped raining everywhere. They were tired,wet,cold, and hungry. They ate some of the food and sat down close to each other to pray some more in thanksgiving for their safety from the storm. After waiting hours for the water to go down it was getting to be daylight. The water had receded some but not enough for them to cross to go home. When daylight come Jim came looking for them he made his horse swim out to the little island. Lula told him to take Pete over first and come back to get her. The food baskets and food were wet but still good. God takes care of the ones that trust him and ask for his help. She told the children to always remember that.

In 1895 she had another son, they named him Ben Rapier. He was thin, small, and very active. He was always restless and never still for a minute. He was born May 22,1895. On Feb.,1897 Lula had another girl and after five boys she was glad it was a girl. Mary Victoria they called her Mamie she was the ninth baby, a very short, fat, and cute girl with curly hair and blue eyes. The next child was Marie Celeste she was born July 21,1899. She was short and thin with a pretty face, blue eyes, and real straight hair, never had a wave in it.
She was good and never was any trouble to her parents.

The next child was Mary Rebecca they called her Beck. She was pretty with blond hair,and blue eyes. Her birthday was Sept. 22, 1901. She grew up to be a, "tom boy" and was always hungry. She followed her brothers around and didn't like her sisters much. When she was small, but as she grew older she was very close to her youngest sisters and brothers. Rebecca like to eat green vegetables right from the garden with salt on them. She would eat radishes and onions. She also liked to go to the Orchard and eat green apples with salt on them. Her dad told her that her stomach would be the death of her and it almost was several times.

Leonard Augustine was born August 22,1903. He was a cute blue eyed baby and very close to his mother after having three girls she was glad to have another little boy. One day when he was about two years old, there was a hard rain in the spring of the year. On the ground there were several small frogs. No bigger than a dime. He caught one,and holding it carefully, he ask his mother,"where is the little

frogs mother". Lula told him,"perhaps the mother died, what would you do if your mother died? He answered,"I would die too" with tears running down his face. He always was kind to his mother. In that year I was born, Catherine Matilda, born July 18,1905. I was healthy at birth, but took a summer cold with a ear ache. My mother said she tried every home remedy, but I cried for three weeks almost day and night. Finally my ear broke and run heavy pus, and it never stopped running until I was nine years old. The pus had a bad odor. I couldn't go to school until I was about nine years old. My mother put glycerin in my ear and it dried up for several years' until I was about 17 year old, when it bothered me again. I went to a doctor and he said I had a mastoid when I was a baby, and it had broke the ear drum to come out. I was even then hard of hearing, it got worse as I got older. I had a happy childhood on our old farm near Samuels, Kentucky.

When I was two years old mom had another baby boy. His name was Earl. He was born Feb. 5, 1907. He was a sweet baby with little yellow curls. He was real active and began talking when he was about 15 months old. He could run faster than I could. He learned all his prayers when he was one and a half years old, and I was still having problems with mine. I was so much Irish, I could not say " Jesus Christ", I would say,"Jasus Christ". All the bigger children would laugh at me. When it was time for us to say our night prayers, the grownups, and children would come around the bed to hear Earl say his, He would finish saying his prayers, then he would pull the blanket over his head and, laugh too.

When he was about two years old, Mom said," Earl run that Chicken out of the Kitchen", It was a warm day and someone left the door open and they didn't have a screen door up yet. Earl went chasing the chicken when it ran out the door, He was running so fast, He just fell out out the door and down three steps. He didn't seem to be hurt at the time, but, seem to have a little limp in one leg. About three weeks later he developed a high fever and when they called Dr. King from Bardstown, He said it was Meningitis and gave them no hope. He lived about a week," Our Little Blond, Blue Eyed, Angel went to Heaven". My mother was very heart broken, as the September before Earl died she had lost her daughter Bessie, she had married Francis Hall in April, 1908 when she was nineteen years old. She had T.B.when she died, She knew everyone and called my Mother to her bed, Mom do you know I am dying?, Mom said," Yes Bessie I Know". Bessie said,"Do you see Grandpa Coomes, Uncle Joe Coomes, Aunt Rene Brown (this was Jessie Brown Mother)(Lula Coomes youngest Sister)". Mom told her," you must be dreaming". "No" she said," They have come to take me Home". Bessie also said," Mom I want to be buried in a white dress with small black bows of ribbon down the front all the way to the hem and when you die mom, I want you to have a black dress with white bows". They both had them as she asked. Also Bessie told," mom, Don't set your heart on keeping Earl, He will die when he is two years old". He died in January before his birthday on February 5, 1908.

My Mother raised all the rest of her family to be married and raise large family with fifty eight grandchildren Alice 12, Russell 4, William 3, Joe none, Bessie none, John 4, Albert 3, Jim 3, Ben 1, Mamie 5, Marie 8, Rebecca 2, Leonard 5, and Catherine 8. Some of the grandchildren were born long after Mom died. My Mother was a wonderful

person, She was always hard working, truthful, strong willed, strong in matters of faith, and morals. She always found time to help neighbors in sickness and trouble. Father Smith of St. Gregory at Samuels, Kentucky said," When ever he had a sick call, she was usually there when he arrived". When she had a stroke that killed her, she was at her son Russell's house to help them for they had a new baby girl (Myrtle Welch-St.Clair). After her stroke, She remained mostly in a coma, except for a short periods, at one of them, she ask for Dad and they talked. She ask his forgiveness if she ever did him any wrong and she told him she forgive him for any misunderstanding ever between them. She died a happy death with thirteen children and Dad around her bed saying The Holy Rosary. Father Smith preached on "Blessed is the one who lay down his life for that of a friend's". He said if that was ever true of any one, it was true of her.

My Mother gave me so much faith in prayers that I believe you can get any thing by prayer. I remember once when I was about eight years old I was helping her hoe the garden and she was so quiet. I look at her to see if she was worried but her lips were moving as if she was talking your someone, I said," Mom are you talking to yourself?". She said," No honey I am preying, I always pray as I work". A few days after that the weather was very hot and dry and we were all tired and hot after a hard day on the farm. We went to bed early. Most of the older children were married or working away from home. There was probably AL, Ben, Mamie, Marie,Rebecca, Leonard, and Myself at home, when the dogs started barking and howling. My Dad got up to see what was wrong. When he got outside he look to the West and North only to see a long light all around both sides of his farm. It was a big forest fire coming over the Knob's in the back part of the farm. The wind was high coming from the West and carrying the fire at great Speed. When the fire would reach a dead tree top where Al and Ben had made railroad ties and left the dead tree tops and bark from the trees. The wind would blow flames from one place to another, some times ten or fifteen feet at one jump. My Dad told Al and Ben to go try and stop the fire by raking a large path in front of it, while he went to Mr Wheeler's and Mr Lashley's to get their boys to come to help. Mom said," If it reached the oats field it would come on to the barn and house". I was frightened, I could only think of one thing to do. I went back to my bed and prayed and prayed, and before my Dad got to Mr Wheeler's about half a mile. He said he almost drowned for it rained so hard. Mom said," it was my prayers". I truly still believe that it was true because my Mother taught me god can help more than any thing else. I have had my prayers answered at least four other times. Only last month I was sick with my hurt knee and then I got the bad dizziness, I sometimes have. The pain in my knee, hip, and ankle was bad but the dizziness had been with me over a week. One night it got so bad I couldn't stay in bed and ever time I turned my head to either side I felt like the bed and me were thrown across the room. I would just grab the mattress and hold on like I was falling. I finally got up and sit in a chair until four A.M. I was so tired I finally lay back down stayed real quiet, not daring to turn my head to either side. I prayed and ask the Lord to please take the dizziness away. I haven't been dizzy since. So it was my Saintly Mother that taught me to pray and have faith. She was a saint on earth and most all her children believed this. I have heard several of my brothers and sisters say this. She had so much suffering in her life and accepted it as it come, but was always trying to help others. I remember when I was about three years old, My Dad and older brothers had built a nice

house. We had been living in a log house ever since they moved on Hell's Half Acre. When they were clearing the land, they would save the logs until they had enough to build a log house,It was just a cabin. About the time Earl was born, my Dad had lumber saver from his own trees. The night Earl was born, he told Dr. King about the house he was building. The Doctor must have thought he was just daydreaming. Mom said," Doctor King said," Jim you better quit building air castles and build something on the ground." Mom said it hurt my Dad so much he cried, even if he did still drink too much, he was really trying. They did build a nice house with the older boys help with money and work too. When it was almost finished, they moved in it. When I was about three years old, one night it caught fire in the kitchen from the cook stove. I don't remember the house or fire, but I remember Uncle Jim Jones carrying me to his house after the fire. I was afraid of his whiskers. When the fire started, my Dad woke up and started screaming fire. The stairs way was all on fire and the big boys were all trapped up stairs. Pete kicked out a window and threw out a feather bed and jumped out on it from a second story window. Then Joe would get Al, John, and Ben to jump to Pete and he would catch them. Jim was a very sound sleeper and Joe couldn't wake him. Finally his shirt caught fire and burned a place on his back and that woke him. Jim and Joe jumped too. They only had on their shirts and shorts, not one saved their pants. Joe had quite a bit of money in his pockets and it burned too. In the mean time mom picked up a feather bed with Earl, Leonard, and Me on it and carried it down the hill and put it under a tree. My dad carried Rebecca, Mamie, and Marie out and put them by us on the bed. Mamie was only partly awake and she wandered off into the woods. After mom made sure ever one was out she went to see about us littlest children, then she missed Mamie, thinking she must have returned to the house, she started calling Mamie and running to the house. Pete saw her and caught her night kimono sleeve as she ran by him but was left standing with the sleeve in his hand. My Dad saw what was happening and caught her just as the house went down in flames. After the noise of the fire quieted down, the fruit jars of vegetables and fruit were bursting like guns going off, there were shot gun shells in the house and they went off. Dishes and glass ware bursting and breaking and everyone crying and screaming. Finally it was quieter and they thought Mamie was dead, when they heard our little old black dog barking in the woods. One of the boys went to get him, when he found the dog was following Mamie. He was still barking and trying to save her. They were so happy to find her and also the dog. All that was saved was the night clothes we wore and two feather beds. We spent the rest of the night in the corn crib on the two beds. At daylight Aunt Alice Jones and Uncle Jim Jones came and took us to their home in Deatsville, Kentucky. Every one sent clothes, furniture, and money. St. Gregory Church and the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth sent money and other things, like clothes, so My Dad, the boy,neighbors, and friends built another log house with four rooms and we lived there from then on. We all married except Al. He, my Mother, and Dad lived there until my Mother died on March 21, 1927.

My Dad came to live with me and my family until his death February 2, 1932. My wish and dream is to be able to buy our old house back. There is eighty six acres. The " Old House" burned down several years ago, some one told me. I would love to go there in April to see if any of Mom's flowers are still there, or the big old sweet apple tree, or the goose berry bushes, or the peonies are still there.